

I myself, when the sun has flamed to full meridian,  
When grass is thirsty and shade more grateful to the flocks,  
Will lead you up to that ancient's den, where he withdraws  
Tired from the waves, that easily you may attack him sleeping.  
But when you have him fast in a handhold and fettered, then  
With the guise and visage of various wild beasts he'll keep you guessing:  
Suddenly he'll turn into a bristling boar, a black tiger,  
A laminated dragon or lioness tawny-necked,  
Or go up in a shrill burst of flame and thus from his fetters  
Escape, or give you the slip gliding off in a trickle of water.  
But the more he transforms himself,  
The tighter, my son, you must strain the shackles that bind his body,  
Until at last it changes back to the first likeness  
You saw at the start when his eyes were closing down in sleep.'

Thus she spoke, and she sprayed a perfume of pure ambrosia  
Over her son's body,  
So that his comely curls wafted a pleasing fragrance  
And his limbs grew strong and lithe . . . There is a giant cave  
Hollowed out from the flank of a mountain where myriad waves  
Forced by the wind drive in and among its coves are dispersed —  
A cosy anchorage once for sailors caught in a storm.  
Proteus shelters within behind a huge rock-barrier.  
Here the nymph puts her son in a hiding-place out of the light,  
Standing herself at a distance, dim in the drapes of mist.  
Now the raving Dog Star that burns parched Indians  
Glared in the sky, and the fiery sun had finished half  
His course: the grass was scorched: the river-beds, dry and gasping,  
Roasted in the sun's rays, were baked to a hot mud.  
Now Proteus came to his customed  
Den from the water: around him the dripping tribes of the deep  
Frolicked, flinging the bitter spray far and wide about them.

[Lines 400-430]

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All over the beach the seals were sprawled for their siesta.  
The wizard himself, just like a herdsman might on the mountains,  
When evening herds the calves homeward out of their pasture  
And wolves prick up their ears hearing the lambs bleating,  
Sat in the midst of them on a rock and took their tally.  
Aristaeus saw his chance:  
Scarcely letting the old man lay down his weary limbs,  
He rushed him with a great shout and shackled him where he lay.  
The wizard for his part remembered well his magic  
And turned himself into all kinds of uncanny things —  
Became a fire, a fearful wild beast, a flowing river.  
But, seeing that no deception could spirit him away, beaten  
He returned to himself and spoke at last in human tones.  
'Boldest of youths, who bade you  
Approach my house? What do you want with me?' The other,  
'You know, Proteus, you know very well: for nothing escapes you.  
Stop being stubborn. Obeying the gods' commands we are come  
To ask the oracle how to revive my drooping fortunes.'  
So much he said. At last now the seer convulsively  
Rolled his glaring eyes so they shone with a glassy light,  
Harshly ground his teeth, and thus gave tongue to Fate. —  
'Not without sanction divine is the anger that hunts you down.  
Great is the crime you pay for. Piteous Orpheus calls  
This punishment on you. Well you deserve it. If destiny  
So wills it. Bitter his anguish for the wife was taken from him.  
Headlong beside that river she fled you. She never saw,  
Poor girl, her death there, deep in the grass before her feet —  
The watcher on the river-bank, the savage watersnake.  
The band of wood-nymphs, her companions, filled with their crying  
The hilltops: wailed the peaks of Rhodope: high Pangaea,  
The unwarlike land of Rhesus,

91

[Lines 431-461]



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